



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

May 24, 2004

Ms. Marianna M. McGowan
Abernathy Roeder Boyd & Joplin, P.C.
P.O. Box 1210
McKinney, Texas 75070-1210

OR2004-4203

Dear Ms. McGowan:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 201951.

The Plano Independent School District (the "district"), which you represent, received a request for the grievance filings and responses from an employee grievance heard by the school board on January 20. The request states that personal information about the employee can be redacted. The district claims the information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.102, 552.117, 552.135, and 552.137 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted sample of information.¹

First, the district asserts the information is confidential under section 551.074 of the Government Code. Section 552.101 excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." This section encompasses information protected by other statutes. Section 551.074 allows a governmental body to conduct certain deliberations about employees in an executive session.

¹We assume that the "representative sample" of records submitted to this office is truly representative of the requested records as a whole. See Open Records Decision Nos. 499 (1988), 497 (1988). This open records letter does not reach, and therefore does not authorize the withholding of, any other requested records to the extent that those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

See Gov't Code § 551.074. This provision does not make information confidential. Thus, the district may not withhold the requested information under section 551.074.

Second, the district asserts the information is private and therefore protected under sections 552.101 and 552.102. Section 552.102 excepts from disclosure "information in a personnel file, the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy." Gov't Code § 552.102(a). In *Hubert v. Harte-Hanks Texas Newspapers*, 652 S.W.2d 546 (Tex. App.—Austin 1983, writ ref'd n.r.e.), the court ruled that the test to be applied to information claimed to be protected under section 552.102 is the same as the test formulated by the Texas Supreme Court in *Industrial Foundation* for information claimed to be protected under the doctrine of common-law privacy as incorporated by section 552.101. See *Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 683-85 (Tex. 1976), *cert. denied*, 430 U.S. 931 (1977). Accordingly, we will consider your section 552.101 and section 552.102 claims together. Information must be withheld under section 552.101 in conjunction with common law privacy if the information is highly intimate or embarrassing and it is of no legitimate concern to the public. *Indus. Found.*, 540 S.W.2d at 685.

Constitutional privacy consists of two interrelated types of privacy: (1) the right to make certain kinds of decisions independently and (2) an individual's interest in avoiding disclosure of personal matters. Open Records Decision No. 455 at 4 (1987). The first type protects an individual's autonomy within "zones of privacy" which include matters related to marriage, procreation, contraception, family relationships, and child rearing and education. *Id.* The second type of constitutional privacy requires a balancing between the individual's privacy interests and the public's need to know information of public concern. *Id.* The scope of information protected is narrower than that under the common law doctrine of privacy; the information must concern the "most intimate aspects of human affairs." *Id.* at 5 (citing *Ramie v. City of Hedwig Village, Texas*, 765 F.2d 490 (5th Cir. 1985)).

This office has found that the following types of information are excepted from required public disclosure under constitutional or common law privacy: some kinds of medical information or information indicating disabilities or specific illnesses, see Open Records Decision Nos. 470 (1987) (illness from severe emotional and job-related stress), 455 (1987) (prescription drugs, illnesses, operations, and physical handicaps), personal financial information not relating to the financial transaction between an individual and a governmental body, see Open Records Decision Nos. 600 (1992), 545 (1990), information concerning the intimate relations between individuals and their family members, see Open Records Decision No. 470 (1987), and identities of victims of sexual abuse, see Open Records Decision Nos. 440 (1986), 393 (1983), 339 (1982). The identifying information of sexual harassment victims and witnesses is also considered private. *Morales v. Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d 519 (Tex. App.—El Paso 1992, writ denied). Moreover, information may be withheld from public disclosure as private in special circumstances where release of the

information would likely cause an imminent threat of harm. Open Records Decision No. 169 at 6 (1977).

In this instance, the requestor agrees to redaction of the identifying information of the employee whose information is at issue. We note that identifying information includes the employee's home address, home telephone number, driver's license number, and social security number. Thus, the employee's privacy interest under sections 552.101 and 552.102, if any, is sufficiently protected, and we need not address the district's claims under sections 552.117 and 552.135 of the Government Code. *See* Gov't Code § 552.117 (excepts from disclosure current or former employee's home address and home telephone number), §552.135 (excepts from disclosure name or information that would substantially reveal identity of former employee of school district who reported possible violation of law to school district).

We note that there are social security numbers in the submitted information. Social security numbers may be withheld in some circumstances under section 552.101 of the Government Code. A social security number or "related record" may be excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 in conjunction with the 1990 amendments to the federal Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 405(c)(2)(C)(viii)(I). *See* Open Records Decision No. 622 (1994). These amendments make confidential social security numbers and related records that are obtained and maintained by a state agency or political subdivision of the state pursuant to any provision of law enacted on or after October 1, 1990. *See id.* We have no basis for concluding that any of the social security numbers in the file are confidential under section 405(c)(2)(C)(viii)(I), and therefore excepted from public disclosure under section 552.101 on the basis of that federal provision. We caution, however, that section 552.352 of the Public Information Act imposes criminal penalties for the release of confidential information.

We note that there are driver's license and license plate numbers in the submitted information. Section 552.130 provides in relevant part:

(a) Information is excepted from the requirement of Section 552.021 if the information relates to:

- (1) a motor vehicle operator's or driver's license or permit issued by an agency of this state; [or]
- (2) a motor vehicle title or registration issued by an agency of this state[.]

You must withhold the marked Texas driver's license number and license plate numbers under section 552.130.

Lastly, the district seeks to withhold the employee's e-mail address under section 552.137. Section 552.137 of the Government Code provides:

(a) Except as otherwise provided by this section, an e-mail address of a member of the public that is provided for the purpose of communicating electronically with a governmental body is confidential and not subject to disclosure under this chapter.

(b) Confidential information described by this section that relates to a member of the public may be disclosed if the member of the public affirmatively consents to its release.

(c) Subsection (a) does not apply to an e-mail address:

(1) provided to a governmental body by a person who has a contractual relationship with the governmental body or by the contractor's agent;

(2) provided to a governmental body by a vendor who seeks to contract with the governmental body or by the vendor's agent;

(3) contained in a response to a request for bids or proposals, contained in a response to similar invitations soliciting offers or information relating to a potential contract, or provided to a governmental body in the course of negotiating the terms of a contract or potential contract; or

(4) provided to a governmental body on a letterhead, coversheet, printed document, or other document made available to the public.

(d) Subsection (a) does not prevent a governmental body from disclosing an e-mail address for any reason to another governmental body or to a federal agency.

The district must withhold the marked e-mail addresses of members of the public under section 552.137 unless these members have affirmatively consented to the release of their e-mail addresses.

In summary, (1) the district must redact the employee's identifying information as agreed to by the requestor, (2) the social security numbers may be excepted under section 552.101 in conjunction with federal law, (3) the marked driver's license and license plate numbers are excepted from release under section 552.130, and (4) the marked e-mail

addresses may only be released with approval of their owners. The district must release the remaining information to the requestor.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

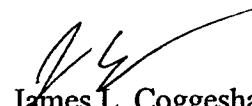
If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Dep't of Pub. Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at (512) 475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this

ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



James L. Coggeshall
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JLC/seg

Ref: ID# 201951

Enc. Marked documents

c: Ms. Kim Breen
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(w/o enclosures)